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THE SPY AND THE PINK

GERANIUMS

An Alice-in-Wonderland
prison break

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ONE WEEK before George Blake escaped from Wormwood Scrubs prison I talked about it with three people, including Charles Taylor, former correspondent of The Globe and Mail in Peking, and Clifford Solway, a television producer. But that is another story.

The news of the escape was given to the world in stages. The first bulletins came over the radio, saying that Blake had sawn through the bars of his cell. Then we were told that he had, in fact, sawn through the bars of the corridor on which his cell stood. Then "officials" speculated that the convicts in the prison might have helped Blake for humanitarian reasons, taking pity on him because of his long sentence.

Next instalment

The next instalment revealed that Blake was a "taciturn intellectual" who had held himself aloof from his fellow prisoners until the Saturday of his escape when he came out into the corridor, which was cozily used as a sort of living room by all the hardened criminals. He acted gregariously on that occasion, made sure he was "noticed" at 5:30 p.m., and some time later rushed out of his cell, into the corridor, pushed out the bars (which by then were being described as broken), jumped 18 feet down to a concrete courtyard without straining any tendons, then sprinted across the courtyard and climbed the outer wall between two watch towers, using a nylon rope ladder reinforced with sewing needles. He

then jumped from the top of the wall to the roof of a waiting car standing at a spot marked earlier in the day with a pot of pink geraniums. The Scotland Yard detectives murdered earlier this year were said to have some possible connection with Blake.

By the Tuesday after the escape, the continuous story leaking officially to the media was getting better and better: Blake had had a cell furnished with considerable luxuries and a Bokhara rug. The business about his being an aloof, taciturn intellectual was dropped and he was described as the life and soul of the jail's social set, a chap who held parties for his fellow prisoners in a room decorated with an image of Saint Paul. And so it went, with the official leaks merrily making the story less credible every day.

Crowning touch

The crowning touch, in my view — the trademark of British intelligence — is the pot of pink geraniums. What makes Britons such marvellous commandos or secret agents is their mischievousness. They are pranksters to a man, and this characteristic has always served them well since it baffles more stolid nations like the Soviet Union or Germany. So pink geraniums it had to be; any other secret service would have used a paper bag with stones in it, or an old can or something one commonly sees thrown away in open spaces. The British secret service would use a pot of pink geraniums.

I also think the British secret service is being decent in making the escape incredible enough to cast doubt on Blake's indictment and thus allow his name to be

cleared eventually. They can't very well exonerate him; the Lord Chief Justice would get pretty shirty at that. Taking Blake out as a corpse might have raised questions; they would have had to refuse his blood relatives permission to bury the body.

Escape it had to be, and probably not by Blake. He is not the sort who jumps 18 feet unharmed on to concrete. Like any star, he had a stunt man "stand-in"; it would not have been too difficult to effect a substitution, someone athletic enough for the acrobatics of the grand finale.

Why do I give the credit to M15? Let's consider the other possibilities. The train robbers and other criminals have escaped, after all. Why couldn't the underworld have taken Blake out? But why does the underworld take someone out? For money. Via the underworld route an escape costs a great deal. People must be paid to create diversions, to bribe guards. If the escape fails, those trying to engineer it risk long sentences.

Blake had no money to buy this sort of underworld loyalty — at his trial and in the subsequent House of Commons debate, it was stated again and again that Blake had been paid nothing by the Russians for his spying, that he had acted because of his fervent conversion to communism.

His wife would not pay the underworld. He has been suing her for divorce. His mother and sister do not have money, I know. Even if they had the money, they wouldn't know how to arrange an underground rescue.

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